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Date: 5/11/04 9:44AM
Subject: RELEASE: Kernan signs executive order creating state commission for early learning, school readiness

OFFICE OF THE GOVERNOR
INDIANAPOLIS, INDIANA 46204-2797

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For immediate release
Tuesday, May 11, 2004

Kernan signs executive order creating state commission for early learning, school readiness

Gov. Joe Kernan today took a crucial step forward in ensuring the future success of Indiana's children by signing an executive order establishing the Indiana Commission for Early Learning and School Readiness.

Joined by a number of members of the new commission, Kernan said the group pulls together the people, expertise and resources necessary to explore and move forward on issues important to Indiana's fiscal and social stability. It includes representatives of state agencies and private organizations that touch children's lives in many ways.

"There is no greater asset to Indiana than our children and their eagerness to learn and achieve. This new commission will help lay the groundwork for their success and will ultimately lead to additional efforts or re-tooled initiatives that will benefit them while they are young," Kernan said. "They'll be looking at maximizing existing resources to their fullest.

"It's essential that we do all we can to make sure our young people start out on the right foot, headed down the right path to not only succeed in school, but also on the job and financially as they move into our future workforce."

The governor added that efforts to strengthen early learning also show the rest of the world that Indiana is a great place to do business, now and in the future.

"For companies that are investing, it's important to know that our future workforce will have the skills they need to remain competitive," Kernan said. "Our focus on our children will certainly help spur further investment on the part of business."

The Indiana Education Roundtable, a bipartisan group created in 1999 by Gov. Frank O'Bannon and comprised of representatives of schools, government, business and parents, first recommended creating the commission in October 2003 as part of its P-16 Plan for Improving Student Achievement. In March of this year, Kernan told members of the roundtable that he intended to act on the recommendation through an executive order.

The commission will be co-chaired by Dr. Suellen Reed, the state's superintendent of public instruction, and Mary Downes, the governor's chief of staff, who worked as an elementary and secondary teacher and principal for more than 20 years.

"We have important work to do for Indiana. I look forward to working with Ms. Downes and the newly appointed members of the Commission," said Dr. Reed. "Providing more opportunities for learners of all ages and connecting the many phases of education can help us provide a constructive path to the future."

The new group has been directed to provide its first public report to the governor and superintendent by Dec. 31, 2004. Commission members' service will be voluntary. Any necessary funding for the commission's work will be covered by grants through the Indiana Family and Social Services Administration and the Indiana State Department of Health.

Kernan proposed the Early Learning Trust in January and urged the members of the General Assembly to act on it. The trust included a plan to fund optional, full-day kindergarten, which would have resulted in the opportunity for 20,000 more Hoosier kids to enroll this fall. While disappointed the plan didn't make it through the legislative process, he was encouraged by the by the widespread support it received from leaders in business and education.

"There is extensive agreement that investing in early education and school readiness pays off," Kernan said. "And research shows that for every government dollar invested in high-quality, comprehensive early care and education, society saves \$7 in welfare, special education and criminal justice costs.

"This commission will delve into not only full-day kindergarten, its benefits and how we may be able to provide it to as many students as possible, but also quality child care and helping parents become even better at teaching their children when they're at home."

The Indiana Commission for Early Learning and School Readiness will meet for the first time in June. Members of the commission are listed on the following page.

Reporters' contacts: Tina Noel or Jonathan Swain, 317-232-4578

Indiana Commission for Early Learning and School Readiness

Dr. Suellen Reed, Indianapolis, co-chair

Mary Downes, Indianapolis, co-chair

Rep. Ralph Ayres, Chesterton, representing the House of Representatives

Sen. Gary Dillon, Columbia City, representing the Senate

Rep. Gregory Porter, Indianapolis, representing the House of Representatives

Sen. Connie Sipes, New Albany, representing the Senate

Marilyn Schultz, Indianapolis, ex-officio, non-voting member (State Budget Agency)

Cheryl Sullivan, Indianapolis, ex-officio, non-voting member (FSSA)

Patricia G. Burton, Indianapolis, representing public school principals

Wendy Robinson, Fort Wayne, representing public school superintendents with full-day kindergarten

Ena Shelley, Indianapolis, representing teacher training programs

Robert Marra, Noblesville, ex-officio, non-voting member (Dept. of Education)

Mary E. Davis, Richmond, representing full-day kindergarten teachers

Pearl Prince, Gary, representing pre-school cooperatives/early learning centers

Dr. Denna Renbarger, Lapel, representing directors of pre-school cooperatives

Brent Leichty, Bourbon, representing parents

Marlane Rae Tisdale, Indianapolis, representing local school boards

Lynn Silvey, Pendleton, representing parents

Kay Harmless, Indianapolis, representing the Indiana Child Care Fund

Kim Dodson, Westfield, representing children with disabilities

Elvia "Annie" Porter, West Terre Haute, representing home care providers

David Holt, Indianapolis, representing business

A. Nanette Bowling, Kokomo, representing Head Start providers

Jenny Sarabia, Indianapolis, ex-officio, non-voting member

Evelyn Ridley-Turner, Indianapolis, ex-officio/non-voting member (Dept. of Correction)

Dr. Gregory Wilson of Indianapolis (Marion Co.) ex-officio, non-voting member (Dept. of Health)

Dianna Wallace, New Castle, representing the Indiana Assoc. for the Education of Young Children (IAEYC)

Debbie Beeler, Mitchell, representing communities

Timothy Dunnuck, Bloomington, representing the Child Care Center (at Indiana University)

Dr. Carol Touloukian, M.D., Bloomington, representing pediatricians

Britt Magneson, South Bend, representing curriculum development specialists

Dr. Maria Del Rio-Hoover, M.D., Evansville, representing child development

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